Environmental Self-Portrait: Envisioning Homecoming in the Holy Land

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By the rivers of Babylon,
There we sat down and wept,
When we remembered Zion.
Upon the willows in the midst of it
We hung our harps.
For there our captors demanded of us songs,
And our tormentors mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion.”

How can we sing the LORD’S song
In a strange land?

The Book of Psalms, 137:1-4

An Inexplicable Personal Connection

The difference between Hussein and me, I realized, while we talked and waited for the Israeli checkpoint to re-open after an undisclosed and indefinitely prolonged “emergency situation”, was that, in an hour or two, I would again be on my bicycle, riding north towards Haifa, then to Akko, then to the beautiful Mediterranean coastal city of Nahariya, and, after a few more weeks of peripatetic, unplanned roaming, to my home 9,000 km away, while he would return to the only village he has ever known and may ever know. I made it through the checkpoint with no trouble, thanks in part to my white skin, my shiny bike, and the geo-political freedom afforded me by my Canadian passport. As I pedalled away from the West Bank, through fields of waist-high rosemary and avocado orchards, under the dying golden light of the Palestinian sun, I was not thinking about ecological justice, nor the importance of understanding our connection to place, nor the fact that my identity as a wealthy, physically able, first-world citizen enabled me ostensibly to travel to and experience all but the tiniest fraction of Planet Earth’s estate; I was thinking only about Hussein, and the bewildered look he gave me when I ignorantly asked if he had ever been to a place beyond the fence.

Having not understood that Palestinians in the West Bank live within the confines of a physical, human-made and militarily-guarded cage, out of which they cannot easily, if ever, travel, Hussein’s solemn but undefeated gaze over the dividing wall, toward the hill country of Nazareth, sadly illuminated for me one small part of the plight of the Palestinian people—that they are not free to define their “place”. Since the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, millions of Palestinians have been forcefully displaced and geographically confined (to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip) by a 26-foot-high cement wall and barbed-wire fences. For no rational reason that I can determine, except that to see an injustice face-to-face (whether it be social, political, ecological, or otherwise), and not feel empathy for the oppressed is impossible, my conversation with Hussein became instantly and profoundly important to me, and I do not expect to soon forget it. In this Environmental Self-Portrait, I will use the literal and metaphorical symbol of environmental confinement in Palestine—the 700km-long separation wall that was built to
protect Israel by controlling the flow of terrorism across its borders—to reflect back on an issue that I would not previously have described as an “environmental” one: the issue of geographical confinement and displacement of oppressed human populations in places like the West Bank. Guided by a theme of mesological “homecoming” in a growing culture of homelessness, a theme that is becoming increasingly important to me and to the writers I will discuss, I will consider what it means for a people to have their physical environment—their home and their place—oppressively defined and forcefully restricted.

“Homecoming” as a new metaphor – Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian Walsh

The environment is not understood merely as a set of biophysical elements which requires only to be approached with objectivity and rigour in order to be better understood and thereby to permit better interaction. Rather, it corresponds to a place of existence, of living—a habitat—with all its historical, cultural, political, economic, emotional, and other aspects. It cannot be considered without taking into account its significance, its symbolic value.

-Lucie Sauvé

An understanding of our immediate environmental surroundings as more than the biophysical context of our existence is preliminary to knowing our place as home. In their book “Beyond Homelessness”, Brian Walsh and Steven Bouma-Prediger rigorously attempt to discover exactly what it is about our place, both the places of our past and the place of our present, that defines “home”. They argue that current pedagogical paradigms teach nomadism, and are aimed at “upward mobility” (the notion that good education must enable us to escape the place of our origin and take us somewhere better and “higher”), but this educational metaphor only serves to create a culture of homelessness, in which “wayfaring nomads…know nothing of the virtues of dwelling, the importance of roots, and love for place” (283). They insist that the value of being connected to even the most modest of places is better than being perpetually without a home.

Thinking back to Palestine, the dividing wall of hostility that let me out, but keeps Hussein in, stands as an unsettling sticking point within Bouma-Prediger’s and Walsh’s discourse about homemaking. If the wall denies Hussein the freedom to roam, whether outwardly or upwardly, and forces the Palestinian people to make their “homes” within clearly defined borders and refugee camps, does it have the potential to be a good thing, if it guarantees homemaking? The answer I find in Bouma-Prediger’s and Walsh’s book is in their discussion of boundaries as a complexity in defining what is “home”. Quoting from Rosemary Haughton, they view boundaries, like the Palestinian dividing wall, from the side of the oppressor: “[t]he impregnable home where the only comers are clones of the hosts becomes not a home but a fortress and a prison combined” (53). What Israel is trying to build is not so much a wall, but a fortress of invulnerability. In doing so, they have turned Palestine into a land of two prisons—one for the oppressed, and one for the oppressor. Not only has the wall created serious disruptions to ecological freedoms (including the natural paths of water courses and the migratory paths of plant and animal species), it has removed what must necessarily be the backdrop to meaningful homemaking: the freedom to wander.

Inherent in Bouma-Prediger’s and Walsh’s argument for valuing our place is the notion that, if we are to connect with our places, we must have the option to choose our place over another one. In other words, if Hussein is never allowed to leave his village of Jenin, how can he possibly learn to value it, when his eyes are constantly fixed on some unattainable, distant, and probably mythical other place? How could I have convinced him that L.A. is not so special a place when he asked me dreamingly if I had ever been to Hollywood? In essence, Hussein is caught in a strange form of homelessness, in which he is not free to define his place and is therefore disabled from truly being able to value it. “Sociocultural borders”,

Bouma-Prediger and Walsh explain, “...map our existence in monolithic, homogenizing, and exclusionary ways” (48). The dividing wall of Palestine is, in my imagination, a 26-foot high guarantee of intended exclusion and controlled homelessness, on either side of which, neither Arab nor Israeli can truly find “inhabitation”.

**Toward a Culture of “Inhabitation” – David Orr**

A resident is a temporary occupant, putting down few roots and investing little, knowing little, and perhaps caring little for the immediate locale beyond its ability to gratify...The inhabitant, by contrast, “dwells”...in an intimate, organic, and mutually nurturing relationship with a place. Good inhabitance is an art requiring detailed knowledge of a place, the capacity for observation, and a sense of care and rootedness.

-David Orr

It is the distinction between “inhabitation” and “residency” that David Orr focuses on primarily in his book *Ecological Literacy*. Like Bouma-Prediger and Walsh, Orr is concerned with how common educational practice is producing a culture of homelessness, in which we relate to our world with a sense of temporary belonging, transience, and without commitment. “The resident”, he explains, “is a...rootless occupant who mostly needs to know where the banks and stores are in order to plug in.” The inhabitant, on the other hand, cannot be removed from a habitat “without doing violence to both...[they] bear the marks of their places, and when uprooted get homesick” (102). The language Orr uses resonates clearly in my consideration of the homelessness of the Palestinian people. It is not just that they are forced to live in confined spaces surrounded by an exclusionary fence, their homelessness is one of displacement from their historical, ancient places of *inhabitation*. When the state of Israel was formed after the Holocaust, it was a miraculous homecoming for droves of Diasporic Jews whose homeland had been lost for almost two thousand years, but it required the displacement of the Arab Palestinians to places of refuge and, essentially, “residency”.

“To reside”, Orr continues, “is to live as a transient and as a stranger to one’s place, and inevitably to some part of the self” (102). It is hard for me to understand that even though Hussein has never left Jenin and may never be able to, he and his people are caught in a perpetual state of transience. The homes of their ancestors have been taken, and, in the process, a part of their identity has been stolen; they have become strangers to themselves. The result is a culture of residency. What the planet needs, Orr contends, is not more successful people, but “more people who live well in their places” (12). Of the five necessary components that Orr sees as being essential to seeing things holistically, the Palestinian dividing wall prevents the “broad understanding of how people and societies relate to each other and to natural systems” (92). As tangibly as the wall disrupts streams and animal paths, it creates an impassable obstruction to connection and relation between two peoples, and the frustrating result is bitterness, malice, and ongoing violence, both to each other and to their shared environment.

**From homelessness to vandalism – Wendell Berry**

My work has been motivated by a desire to make myself responsibly at home in this world and in my native and chosen place.

-Wendell Berry, *Home Economics*

In the fourteen prosaic essays that comprise his *Home Economics*, Wendell Berry preaches a return to a focus on what fundamentally creates a healthy planet: the functional coexistence of healthy households. He explores the notion of being “responsibly at home” through stewardship and conscientious household management. Underlying his message is the inviolable truth that responsible global
citizenship begins with responsible local citizenship—that is, citizenship at home. The problem he sees threatening the very health of our planet is that a “powerful class of itinerant professional vandals” are laying waste to our world because they have no appreciation for any place as home. These ecological destroyers “have no local allegiance” (51). The logic in Berry’s assertion hinges on the contention that if we are placeless or perpetually homeless, whether by choice or by coercion, we are destined to become ecological vandals. In being denied the freedom to choose our place, we are denied reason to value our home, and our focus will then shift to destruction.

On a visit to Whitehorse, I passed through a local First Nations Reservation that had received an immense injection of government funding for new homes and infrastructure only a few years before, but every one of the homes now lay in ruins and was practically unliveable. The blame is not to be placed on irresponsibility or mismanagement, but on the inability of a people whose former inhabitation had been appropriated by an oppressor to value a place where they now lived as a displaced, confined, and homeless culture. Having been relieved of the freedom to choose their place, their response was an expression of maligned power in the form of environmental destruction and vandalism. While the “itinerant professional vandals” Berry describes are motivated to destroy the planet for exploitative, gainful reasons, truly dispossessed populations vandalize only to retaliate. The case in Palestine is no different; without a reason to value their own place, a rational recourse is to devalue the place of the oppressor with violence and vandalism. It is hardly surprising why so many rockets are fired from the Gaza Strip into southern Israel. The tragic irony of the situation in Israel is that the dividing wall, built to protect and clearly define two separate “homes”, creates the very things from which it must protect: hostility and vandalism.

**Broken promises of homecoming – Documentarist B.Z. Goldberg**

I remember watching B.Z. Goldberg’s documentary “Promises” as soon as I returned home from Israel. I had spent a night at the Dheishe refugee camp in western Bethlehem and was told about a documentary that examined the parallel lives of Palestinian children who grew up in the camp and Israeli children who grew up in Jewish Jerusalem, less than 15km away. In the film, Goldberg attempts to facilitate a homecoming of the Muslim and Jewish children who live in such close geographical proximity, but are separated by an infinitely wide cultural, religious, and political distance. The homecoming he seeks is not simply that of two populations existing well in two separate places, but of two populations existing well in one common, shared place. His hope is that mutual homelessness, as a result of geographical disconnection, can perhaps be undermined by bringing the children together and letting them talk, play, burp, and learn together.

Goldberg dreams of a simple solution to an impossibly complex problem: bring the children together in a shared place, facilitate dialogue, and observe as they forget their differences and forge bonds that transgress separative boundaries. Goldberg is striving after Wendell Berry’s notion of creating community and restoring homecoming within a local place, but he finds that as the children grow up, it is impossible for them to find any common ground on which to forge mutual homecoming. The children are not free to choose their place; neither the Israeli nor the Palestinian children are able to cross over to the place of the other. Against the background of “unshareable” places, the children grow up with unshareable lives, and homecoming remains an unattainable aspiration.
Seeing through walls – the art of Banksy  

Old Palestinian man: “You make the wall look beautiful.”  
Banksy: “Thanks”  
Old Palestinian man: “We don't want it to be beautiful. We hate the wall. Go home.”

While the writings of the authors discussed all speak of homemaking and fit perfectly into Sauvé’s definition of the humanist/mesological current of environmental education, none of them speak specifically about the homelessness of the Palestinian people. Without even a single word, Banksy has vocalized the issue more articulately and poignantly than any of them. As a clandestine graffiti artist whose identity is unknown but whose work is unmistakable, Banksy has done some of his most important and famous graffiti artwork on the cement sides of the towering separation wall. Perhaps even unaware of his contribution to discourses about environmental homemaking, Banksy uses graffiti art literally to see through the dividing wall and to visually imagine reconciliation and restitution within what is, in reality, a nearly hopeless situation. Quoting from Henry Giroux, Bouma-Prediger and Walsh “[call] for a pedagogy and cultural criticism that crosses borders, arguing that we need ‘forms of transgression in which existing borders forged in domination can be challenged and redefined’ (48). With each painting, Banksy is seeking to envision what such a transgression might look like. His work is always underpinned with the constant comment that what can be envisioned, can be realized. Too often, however, our hostility and refusal to work toward reconciliation and restitution stand in the way of homemaking, and we are left fortifying our walls of invulnerability and exclusion. Banksy’s paintings, therefore, are not so much prophecies as they are daydreams.

Works Cited


